

Reviews : Building democracy in South Asia:
India, Nepal, Pakistan by Maya Chadda

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Building Democracy In South Asia: India, Nepal, Pakistan. Maya Chadda. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000. pp. xv + 247. USD \$49.95. ISBN: 1-55587-859-8.

In the study of comparative politics, theories about transition from authoritarianism to democracy often have western perspectives. There are hardly any works that deal specifically with emerging democracies in the South Asian region. Dr. Maya Chadda, Professor of Political Science at William Paterson University, New Jersey, USA, makes a sincere effort in finding an alternative proposition on democratic theory and the extent to which it has played a role in the shaping of democratic institutions in South Asia.

Democracy in its traditional form has evolved since the Age of the Enlightenment through the writings of Thomas Jefferson during the American War of Independence and on to the more contemporary institutions of the west. These institutions place their emphasis on individual rights, equality, liberty, social justice, limited government, checks and balances, competing political parties, regularly held elections and fair and impartial judiciary. Two common yardsticks that have guided the democratic process are political development and modernization. In recent years, with the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and the East European countries, scholars (such as Bruce Russett, Ronald Inglehart and Robert Dahl) have attempted to define democracy in procedural terms by linking the growth of democracy to the evolution of peace between regional rivals such as Greece and Turkey in Europe or India and Pakistan in South Asia.

The South Asian experimentation in democracy is unique in many respects. According to Chadda, South Asian countries, including India in particular and Nepal and Pakistan to a lesser degree, have combined democratization with economic development and the consolidation of the state. The author also subscribes to the "elite bargain theory" that, in South Asia, there has been an on-going process of bargain between the center and the periphery, with each competing to carve a niche for itself within the federal polity. Although each of the three countries under study in Chadda's book have different levels of development, only India chose to have a secular polity, in spite of its Hindu majority, while Pakistan and Nepal opted respectively for an Islamic state and a Hindu kingdom.

Although Dr. Chadda has raised the issue of ethnicity, caste, and religious nationalities as hindrances to the emergence of stable democracies in South Asia, she does not follow up and develop these points further. Her discussion also fails to explore as to how the above mentioned elements have indeed derailed the prospects for democracy in the region.

The author also fails to articulate clearly how poverty, instability, corruption and violence can prove decisive in frustrating the development of democracy in South Asian countries. While Chadda argues that factors such as poverty and corruption can be detrimental to the process of growth, she nevertheless appears to rationalize existing conditions by attributing the spread of poverty and corruption to long years of colonial exploitation and loss of natural resources alone. In so doing, she seems to absolve the governing elite of the South Asian countries who should also bear a great deal of the blame.

One can also question the author's view that failure of democracy on one issue and in one part of a country or in one particular moment does not mean

failure of the democratic transformation as a whole. (p.224). For example, during the period of 1975-77, India was undergoing a phase of internal emergency with severe curtailment of some fundamental rights of its citizens. In Pakistan in October 1999, General Pervaiz Musharaff took over power from the democratically elected civilian government of Nawaz Shariff. These events could very well be regarded as gravely endangering democracy and undermining the democratization process in those South Asian countries.

In spite of the above mentioned shortcomings, Maya Chadda's book adds new insights to existing scholarship on democratic regimes and nation building in South Asia. The book is a welcome addition to the field of comparative politics and third world studies. Scholars and policy makers who have an abiding interest in South Asia will immensely benefit from this book.

*Mohammed B. Alam
malam@miyazaki-mic.jp
Miyazaki International College*